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James, Nickolas

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A Critical Evaluation of Micro-Credentialing and Stacking in Legal Education

Professor Nick James

Executive Dean, Faculty of Law
Bond University



ABSTRACT

The line between continuing professional development and postgraduate study is being blurred by the emergence of 'micro-credentials' and the ability to 'stack' them to earn credit towards a traditional postgraduate qualification.

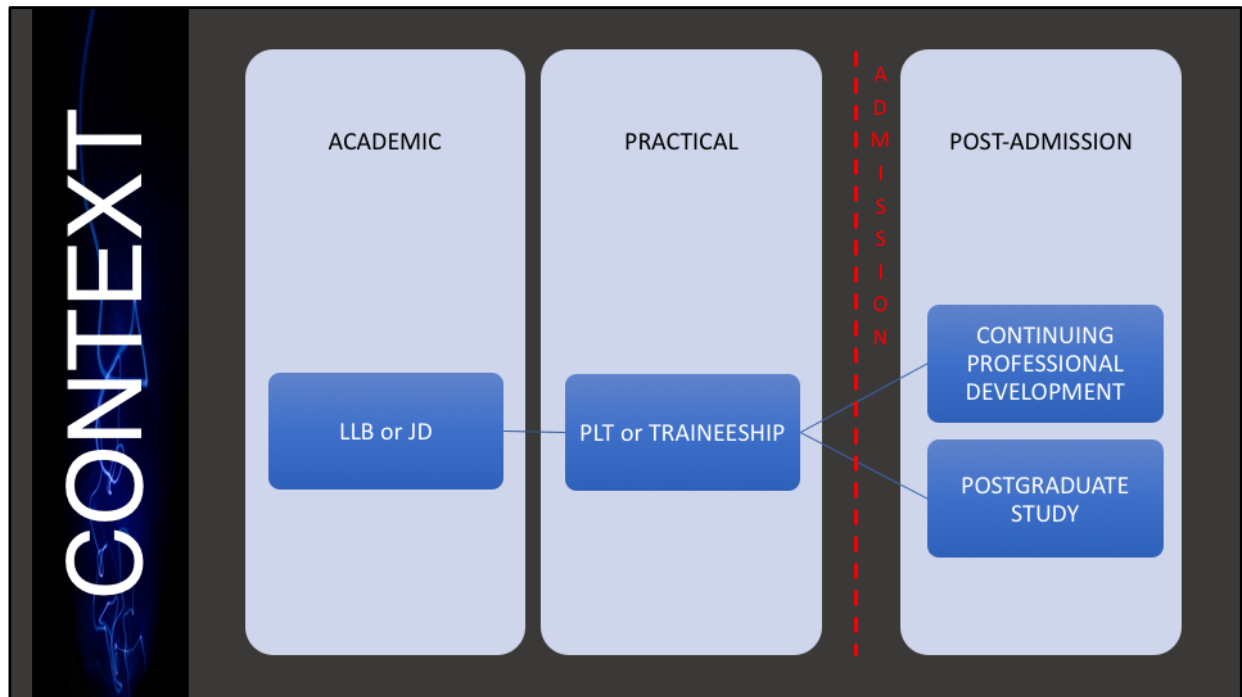
This paper examines how micro-credentialing and stacking work within the context of legal education, and critically evaluates the emergence of this trend by identifying the significant benefits and challenges.

While there is reason to be concerned about the ongoing commodification and vocationalisation of higher education, the conclusion is reached that the development is on balance a positive one.

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This paper examines how micro-credentialing and stacking work within the context of legal education, and critically evaluates the emergence of this trend by identifying the significant benefits and challenges.

While there is reason to be concerned about the ongoing commodification and vocationalisation of higher education, the conclusion is reached that the development is on balance a positive one.



For most legal professionals, their journey of lifelong learning ‘splits’ following admission into two pathways, continuing professional development and postgraduate study, with little or no interaction between the two.

Continuing professional development (CPD) may be mandated or voluntary, and is typically comprised of learning experiences that are:

- Relatively short in duration – from a one hour seminar to a conference across 3 or 4 days
- Practice focused
- Delivered online or face-to-face
- Not assessed

Postgraduate study (PS) is usually voluntary (although note the emerging expectation of PG study in some European firms) and is typically comprised of learning experiences that are:

- Longer in duration – from a one semester graduate certificate through a 2 to 4 semester Masters to a 3-6 year PhD
- Scholarly and theoretical
- Delivered online or face-to-face
- Assessed

MICRO-CREDENTIALLING AND STACKING have the potential to bridge the gap between CPD and PS.

OUTLINE

1. What are micro-credentialing and stacking?
2. Who is micro-credentialing and stacking?
3. What are the benefits?
4. What are the challenges?

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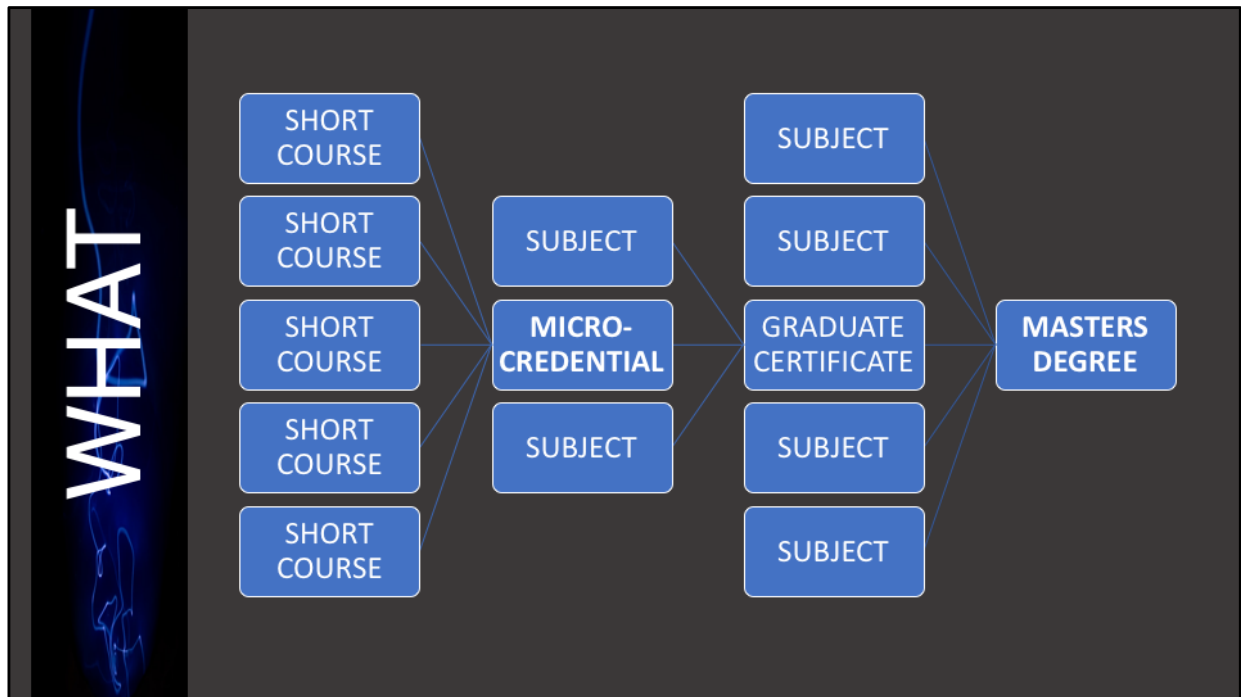
WHAT

A **micro-credential** is a 'mini-qualification' that demonstrates that a person has acquired specific skills, knowledge, and/or experience in a given subject area. Micro-credentials tend to cover more than a single short course but less than a traditional qualification like a diploma or a degree.

Micro-credentials can sometimes be **stacked** into credit towards a traditional qualification.

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Micro-credentials can sometimes be **stacked** into credit towards a traditional qualification.



The 'stacking' of CPD short courses into micro-credentials, and micro-credentials into postgraduate study in the form of a graduate certificate or a Masters, looks something like this ...

This development is contributing to the 'unbundling' and 'rebundling' of the lifelong learning journey, and a blurring of the boundaries between professional development and postgraduate study.

Micro-credentials are rising in popularity among higher education institutions. Once considered leading-edge, micro-credentialing is becoming more commonplace despite some cautious skepticism:

<https://evollution.com/programming/credentials/microcredentials-on-the-outside-looking-in/>

WHAT

- Nano-degrees and micro-masters
- Bootcamps
- Verified certificates
- Digital badges

The following are some of the concepts associated with micro-credentialing and stacking:

- **Nano-degrees and micro-masters:** These are types of micro-credentials. They are short programs comprised of a series of undergraduate or postgraduate level short courses, typically delivered online, and often entitling the learner to credit towards a full university degree.
- **Bootcamps:** Bootcamp-style courses are short, intensive courses that usually focus on a single topic or skill. The objective is for the student to learn the exact knowledge or skill they need in the shortest time possible, so they can quickly apply what they have learned.
- **Verified certificates:** A verified certificate certifies that the identity of a learner who has completed an online short course has been verified using a webcam and photo ID. A fee may be payable by the learner. (If completion of a short course is going to entitle the learner to credit towards a university degree there must be assurance that the person enrolling is the person who completed the course.)
- **Digital badges:** A digital badge is a validated indicator of accomplishment, skill, quality, or interest. It is usually delivered automatically by an online platform upon completion of a short course, and can be retained and displayed by the learner in a digital portfolio.



Digital badges are an element of the **gamification** of education.

Gamification is the incorporation into any non-game context of some of the elements of games with the objective of motivating 'players' to continue 'playing'. It has been happening for a long time: allocating marks, promoting competition, and awarding prizes are all examples of the gamification of education. If an instructor has incorporated into their course opportunities for student choice; or provides opportunities for immediate feedback, social connection, or collaborative problem solving; or sets challenges for students and offers rewards for completing them, they have gamified their teaching. By incorporating these elements, they are influencing student behaviour and student learning using gaming strategies.

Awarding digital badges upon completion of online tasks, modules, courses and programs are simply a new, and successful, way of gamifying the learning process. Consider the appeal of leader boards and trophies in online gaming and you will understand why digital badges are seen as a viable way to motivate learners and enhance their engagement with a course.

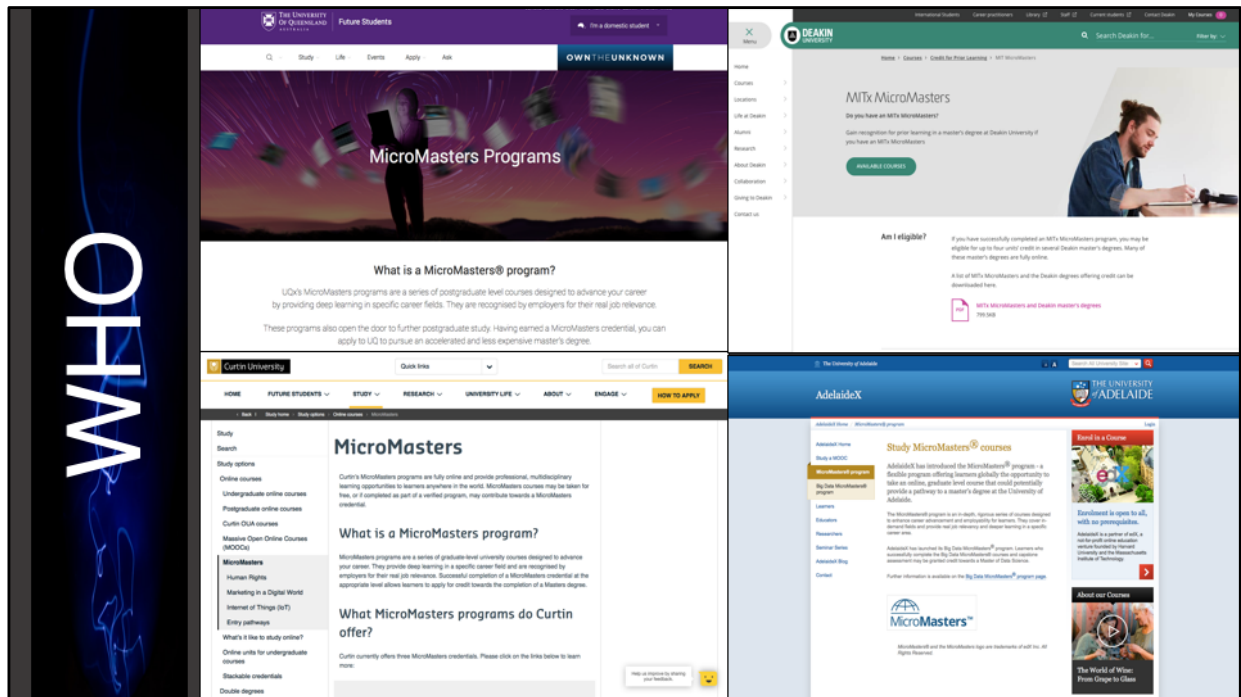
As with any pedagogy, gamification does not automatically promote student engagement, and gamification has its [critics](#), but there is an increasing literature in support of its effectiveness as a tool to promote student learning.

PLATFORM	MICROCREDENTIALS
Coursera	Specialization, MasterTrack Certificate, Professional Certificate
edX	XSeries, MicroMasters, Professional Certificate
Udacity	Nanodegree
FutureLearn	Program, Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma
Kadenze	Program

The leading independent providers of micro-credentials are Coursera, edX, Udacity, FutureLearn and Kadenze. Some micro-credentials lead to credit towards university programs, others do not. (This is a reflection of the fact that a pathway to postgraduate study is important for some learners but not for others.)

Source: <https://www.class-central.com/report/moocs-microcredentials-analysis-2018/>:

1. Coursera Specialization - Some potential to receive university credit for programs associated with particular degree programs (e.g. the iMBA from the University of Illinois)
2. edX XSeries - No for-credit options
3. FutureLearn Program - Some include options to earn university credit
4. edX Professional Certificate - At least 2 offer some option for professionals of a certain background to earn credit
5. Kadenze Program - Some include options to earn university credit
6. Udacity Nanodegree - No for-credit options
7. edX MicroMasters - Almost all MicroMasters include options to earn credit (or become eligible for accelerated completion) towards particular master's degree programs
8. Coursera MasterTrack - All MasterTrack programs include an option to earn credit towards a particular degree program
9. Coursera Professional Certificate - Two of the three Professional Certificate programs currently available offer options to earn credit towards a degree
10. FutureLearn Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma - Both of these microcredentials are "for-credit" in the Australian system of postgraduate credentials



Some universities are themselves moving into this space.

A 2016 report by Pearson and UPCEA, [*Demographic Shifts in Educational Demand and the Rise of Alternative Credentials*](#), indicated that 64 percent of the US higher education institutions surveyed see alternate credentialing as a future strategy and revenue-generating opportunity, with one in five institutions surveyed already offering some form of alternative credentialing. Some higher education institutions are partnering with third-party providers while others have chosen to go it alone with alternative credentialing initiatives.

In Australia, universities now offering their own MicroMasters programs include the University of Queensland, Deakin University, Curtin University and the University of Adelaide.



What about the smaller providers of professional development programs and courses?

There is going to be increasing pressure for them to partner with larger providers and universities to create pathways from their courses into postgraduate study.

Over time, there are going to be efforts ... to try to organize more of these non-institution-delivered credential systems in ways that integrate and connect with existing systems. In other words, we're finding ways for non-institutional education providers to better link certifications, certificate, degrees, industry-driven qualifications and new efforts like badges and other types of credentialing, with the existing credential ecosystem. – 'Moving from "Alternative Credentials" to an Integrated Credential Ecosystem', <https://evollution.com/uncategorized/moving-from-alternative-credentials-to-an-integrated-credential-ecosystem/>.

BENEFITS

The benefits of micro-credentialing and stacking for **learners** include:

- enhanced coherence in their lifelong learning journey;
- improved access to higher education;
- maximisation of outcomes from their participation in CPD;
- enhancement of their employability and promotion prospects by providing evidence of their mastery of specific skills; and
- formal recognition and rewarding of a wider range of learning experiences.

The benefits of micro-credentialing and stacking for learners include:

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BENEFITS

The benefits of micro-credentialing and stacking for **CPD providers** include:

- enhancement of their credibility and rigour; and
- access to new markets.

The benefits of micro-credentialing and stacking for **universities** include:

- the unlocking of institutional expertise by making it available in smaller 'chunks';
- enhancement of their relevance, authenticity and ability to address current skill gaps; and
- the creation of new pathways to postgraduate education.

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CHALLENGES

The significant challenges associated with micro-credentialing and stacking include:

- the cost of digital badging and verification platforms;
- inconsistencies between micro-credentialing platforms and pathway arrangements;
- the negotiation of agreements between CPD providers and universities;
- difficulties demonstrating that CPD is delivered and assessed appropriately;
- the cost differential between CPD courses and postgraduate programs;
- ensuring genuine cohesiveness and consistency in the lifelong learning journey;
- maintaining both academic rigour and the perception of academic rigour.

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CHALLENGES



This final challenge is a significant one, and one that in fact increases as micro-credentialing and stacking becomes more widespread.

Micro-credentialing and stacking is likely to be criticised as leading to the commodification and vocationalisation of higher education.

By this I mean the transformation of educational experiences into (1) products to be consumed, and (2) experiences that focus primarily if not entirely upon enhancement of the learner's employability and ability to engage in productive work. Enhancing employability is of course an important objective of engaging in learning but it is not the only objective (contrary to what some contemporary public discussion of the role of universities might suggest). Teaching and learning is a central element of the endeavour to preserve, enhance and transmit human knowledge from one generation to the next. Its goals include not only helping the learner to get a job but also helping the learner contribute to the public good and facilitating a positive transformation of the self.

Postgraduate study has traditionally been characterised by a prolonged and immersive engagement with a field of knowledge. If more and more postgraduate study is comprised of 'bootcamp' style learning experiences, i.e. short, intensive courses that focus upon the development of practical skills and the fast acquisition of current knowledge, there is a danger that something of value to our community will be lost.

Of course, this assumes that all postgraduate study will be subsumed by micro-credentialing and stacking, and this is unlikely. There will still be learners who prefer to engage in postgraduate study in the traditional way, and many of the learners who choose to earn a postgraduate qualification via micro-credentialing and stacking are less likely to be ones who would otherwise have enrolled in an LLM or PhD and more likely to be learners who would never have undertaken postgraduate study at all.

And that, in my view, makes this development a positive one.

THANK YOU

Professor Nick James, Bond University
njames@bond.edu.au

